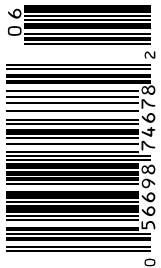


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Vol. 49 No. 6

A Moment
of
Hope...

COVID-19 RESPONSE

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'We Are People of Courage'

A prayer for the
people of God in
the time of corona-
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Sojourners magazine (ISSN 0364-2097) is published monthly, except September-October is combined, at 408 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002. Periodicals Postage Paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Canadian Publications Sales Agreement #257494. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Sojourners, PO Box 48, Congers, NY 10920-9856.



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From the Editor

Immersed in the enforced sabbath of shelter-in-place, it can be difficult to focus on anything other than the coronavirus and its consequences and to seek a return to “normal.” But it’s becoming clear that the pandemic is one of those rare, epoch-defining moments. When we finally come out the other side, the ways we interact with each other will likely be changed. Perhaps, more deeply aware of the brevity and fragility of life, we will take less for granted in our relationships, reassessing what is important and how we use our limited time on this earth. Our politics, too, cannot be unaffected by the truths uncovered by the pandemic. We’ve seen the deadly consequences of corruption and blustering incompetence at the highest levels of an administration seeking to exploit the contagion to consolidate power, taking action against everything from independent watchdogs and federal gas mileage standards to immigrants and environmental protections—with particular efforts aimed at suppressing access to the ballot box.

But we’ve also been given glimpses of what a different kind of future might look like, in the blue skies over LA and Beijing in our suddenly less-fossil-fuel-burning world and in the myriad loving ways neighbors care for socially distant neighbors. That future looks a lot like the beloved community.

RESPONSE

On a Roll

In the April issue (“America’s Vanishing Voter”), Myrna Pérez wrote about how some states with histories of racial discrimination are purging voters from registration rolls. “That’s why I keep telling people to check to see if they’re still registered,” replied reader Darby Tarr. “How do you check to see if you are still registered?” asked Lois Salyer. Good question! You can quickly confirm your registration status at vote.org. “A good plan is to check 30 days before the election, a week before the election, and the day before the election,” wrote Pérez—and contact your local election official immediately if you have any problems.

Write us: response@sojo.net



"WHILE
FEAR WANTS
US TO
BELIEVE
WE ARE
ALONE, FAITH
KNOWS
DIFFERENTLY."

Rev. Crystal Hardin
Washington, D.C.

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Julia Alvarez

The practice of writing is not unlike the practice of meditation, says Dominican American novelist and poet Julia Alvarez (p. 39). "In both disciplines, you lose yourself in the present moment and you tap something much deeper, fuller, and timeless. It's the 'ongoingness' of the work that really matters." A National Medal of Arts recipient, Alvarez is most recently the author of the novel *Afterlife* and an illustrated children's book, *Already a Butterfly: A Meditation Story*.



Abby Olcese

As soon as she learned to read, Abby Olcese was drawn to movie reviews in the *Chicago Tribune*. Now a film critic herself, the *Sojourners* culture columnist says her "goal is to help readers think more expansively about film in a social justice and spiritual sense" (p. 41). Her favorite movie is *The Night of the Hunter* (1955): "In addition to being a great thriller, it's an incredible illustration of how Christians are called to love—and shows the phony, dangerous nature of judgmental faith."

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U.S.: \$39.95 one year print (for first-class mail, \$50). Digital subscriptions to Sojourners are available for \$19.95 at sojo.net/subscribe. **Australia:** \$78 one year (via air mail, paid in Australian currency, and sent to MediaCom, PO Box 610, Unley 5061 SA). **New Zealand:** \$97 one year (via air mail, paid in New Zealand currency, and sent to MediaCom, PO Box 9483, Wellington, NZ); email admin@mediacom.org.au. **Canada:** \$49.95 one year (paid in USD). **All other international** (six to eight weeks delivery): \$59.95 one year. **Air service overseas** (two to three weeks delivery): \$69.95 one year. Except where noted, payable in U.S. currency.

NEWSSTAND CIRCULATION

Newsstand circulation through Districor Magazine Distribution Services. For more information, call (905) 619-6565, fax (905) 619-2903, or email mraucci@districor.com.

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1

HEARTS & MINDS

BY JIM WALLIS

PERFECT LOVE

Much of the country is still on lockdown to save countless lives by slowing the spread of COVID-19. The economic consequences for families, and especially for the most vulnerable people, are incalculable and rising by the day. The U.S. has the most confirmed cases of the disease in the world, with a staggering death toll. All of us have friends and loved ones who are sick or who have died, and hospitals in many parts of the country are under enormous strain.

It's critical that—even as we stand apart from each other for our physical health—we find new ways to stay together for our mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Our physical health requires social distancing in a pandemic, but maintaining our spiritual health means we can't let that lead to social isolation, espe-

**"OUR PHYSICAL
HEALTH REQUIRES
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THAT LEAD TO SOCIAL
ISOLATION."**

“AMID THIS FEARFUL TIME, WE MUST NOT LET FEAR BECOME A WAY OF LIFE.”



Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine.

cially for the most vulnerable. Even as we live more separated, we must find new ways to be together.

Turning from physical contact with others must not cause us to turn away from each other, but rather turn to each other in better, deeper, and healthier ways. How can we stay in even closer contact, over our phones and social media, with friends, family, and especially people who are alone; see what they need; and help them not feel so isolated and afraid? The answers must stem from active, creative, and innovative faith that leads to action.

Our response to the coronavirus pandemic must be effective and practical—and deeply theological at the same time. It is the vocation of the faith community to help us do that. We’ve seen inspiring and innovative examples of people worshipping and praying together without leaving their homes, as well as the selfless and sacrificial actions of people delivering food, medicine, and other necessary supplies to medically vulnerable members of their communities. People whose income sources are more secure are stepping up to aid those most economically at-risk in this crisis.

More time at home can create more focus and passion for pressuring policymakers on both sides of the aisle to enact policies that protect both health and people’s ability to put food on the table, keep the lights on, and remain in their homes. Given that the economy is in what some have likened to a medically induced coma, political leaders must support those who need help getting through this immediate health crisis as well as the economic crisis that is likely to be with us for considerably longer than the virus itself.

Amid this fearful time, we must not let fear become a way of life. We remember the words of Jesus: “Perfect love casts out fear.” Learning what it really means to love our neighbors in this crisis will be crucial to our collective health and survival. ✕



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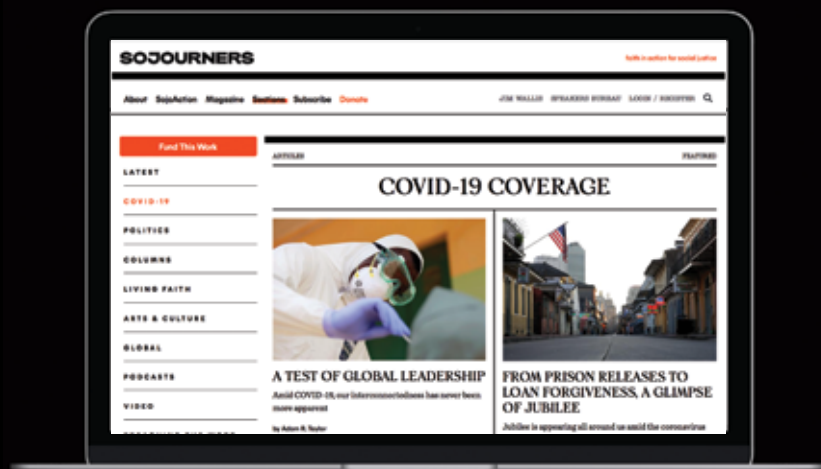


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ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

This pandemic has forced a global sabbath. Will it also lead to a global Jubilee?



2

We don't know the full extent of the coronavirus pandemic. We know of the many who have died as a direct result of infection. We know that whole countries have turned on a dime to shield themselves from the shadow of death as it passes over. We don't know where it will lead.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Rebecca Solnit wrote, "Horrible in itself, disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, that paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister's and brother's keeper." Solnit reminds us that disasters and plagues sometimes signal liberation.

COVID-19 has forced the human community into mourning. In our retreat from the work-a-day world, it has imposed a global sabbath and Jubilee. Staring into this "cruel scourge," as John of Ephesus described the Justinian plague in the year 545 C.E., can we also see that another world is possible?

The Jubilee legislation found in Leviticus 25 lays out a vision for “social and economic reform unsurpassed in the ancient Near East,” according to Robert K. Gnuse. The Jubilee laws declared that Yahweh was the rightful owner of all the earth, and therefore all Israelites—rich and poor—have an equal right to its abundance, within limits. In an economic system based on land and its produce, this was a radical transformation. The legislation undercut wealth disparities by preventing land speculation and by mandating debt forgiveness and interest-free loans. Finally, it ordered the release of the enslaved and those in debtors’ prison.

God created the world with abundance, but also with perimeter alerts. Pandemics are just one alarm bell the earth is sounding. Rising sea levels, melting polar ice, and disrupted seasons are all part of the earth’s complex warning system alerting us that humans are living beyond our limits.

In March, traffic levels in New York City were down 35 percent and carbon monoxide dropped by 50 percent. Notably, scientists say that we may see carbon dioxide emissions as low as during the last financial crisis in 2008. When extractive global economic activity is reduced, greenhouse gases plummet.

Wealth disparities are not a given, they are a choice. Proponents of an unfettered free market have become socialists overnight—demanding direct payments to most U.S. taxpayers, increases and expansion of unemployment benefits, industry bailouts at levels that essentially nationalize whole sectors, the underwriting of struggling hospitals and health care systems, and the launching of a newly trained American workforce into production of COVID-19 protective equipment and testing supplies. We can choose to distribute wealth more equitably.

In a crisis, CEOs (or magazine editors) are not “essential workers.” Instead, we rely on grocery clerks, physician’s assistants, truck drivers, plumbers, first responders, farm workers, IT administrators, and short-order cooks. Is it time to pay essential workers a salary and benefits package that matches Boeing’s CEO? Essential workers

**“IN THE SUSPENSION OF
THE USUAL ORDER, WE ARE
FREE TO LIVE AND ACT
ANOTHER WAY.”**

should be feeling their political power and leveraging it.

This spring, we saw local governments across the U.S. release thousands of inmates to prevent virus outbreaks. Prosecutors demanded the release of nonviolent offenders, the elderly and sick, those within six months of completing their sentences, and those who cannot afford cash bail. What about forgiving their prison debt too? An important component of Jubilee is the release of slaves and prisoners, forgiveness of debts, and the manifestation of the mercies of God.

“If paradise now arises in hell,” wrote Solnit, “it’s because in the suspension of the usual order and the failure of most systems, we are free to live and act another way.” This liberation, forged in exhaustion and personal grief, must build power for the world that God intends—one where earth is sacred, mutual aid brings pleasure, labor is fairly compensated, economic inequity is diminished, priority is given to family and kinship, and praise of God is commonplace. It is ours to choose. ❖

Rose Marie Berger is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

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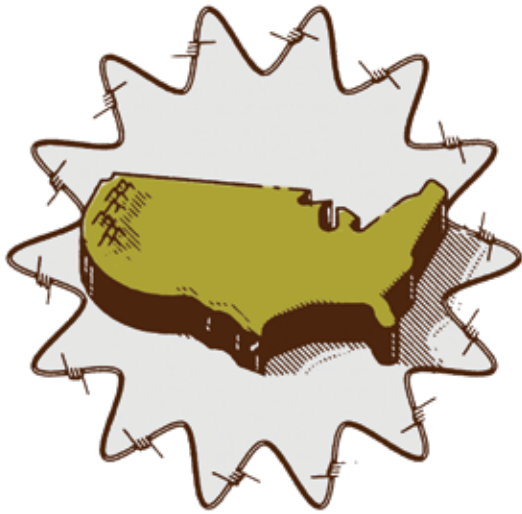
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COMMENTARY

BY ALLYSON MCKINNEY TIMM



A REPORT CARD ON HUMAN RIGHTS

A global review will render judgment on Trump's appalling record.

How has America honored its avowed commitment to human rights over the last four years? Fellow nations will consider that question later this year during the Universal Periodic Review, a quadrennial evaluation by the U.N. Human Rights Council to which all member states are subject.

The review, scheduled for this spring before postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, promises a thorough accounting of U.S. progress and failings on human rights at home. Given the Trump administration's withdrawal from global processes designed to safeguard human rights and its dubious moves to redefine the scope of human rights protections, this review is vital.

Central to human rights and our modern conception of justice is the idea of equality. No one is above the law. All should be treated fairly, without bias or favor—a value reflected in the biblical juridical instruction to not “be partial to the poor or defer to the rich” (Leviticus 19:15).

This principle of equality animates the review, a uniquely democratic process in which every nation can speak truth to every other and none is exempt. “Universality, impartiality, objectivity, and non-selectivity” are guiding principles. With no regard for American “exceptionalism,” the UPR's egalitarian structure aims to blunt the politicized use of human rights, in the U.S. and elsewhere, against adversaries alone.

The periodic review relies chiefly on standards the U.S. has explicitly accepted: human rights treaties it has ratified and other voluntary

pledges. It also draws on widely endorsed principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Dozens of civil society groups weighed in last October with evidence of the roll-back of human rights under the Trump administration, documenting threats to the right to vote and to free speech, excesses of the criminal justice system, and intractable sexual violence, to name a few. Violations of migrants' rights occupy a central focus of the stakeholder reports. U.S. transgressions include family separation, child detention, and other inhumane treatment, which violated the country's binding human rights commitments to respect family unity, protect children, and eschew degrading treatment.

The family separation scandal reminds us how human rights provides a vital safeguard that all nations should heed, the U.S. included. It calls into question why the U.S. doesn't embrace more such protections—such as the widely ratified treaty on children's rights, which would have barred the family separation debacle.

In February, the administration missed the deadline to submit a national self-assessment. While the State Department's website calls the U.S. “a strong supporter of the UPR process,” at this writing it had no substantive comment on the 2020 review. Nevertheless, the U.N. Human Rights Council will proffer recommendations to the U.S. government, which can serve as a useful blueprint for advocacy in years ahead.

The UPR is an imperfect process seeking to enforce noble ideals. Still, if Americans care about human rights, we should welcome accountability and urge forthright self-evaluation by our government. Stable, mutually affirmed global norms that foster peace and security aren't just idealistic goals; they serve U.S. national interest as well. Such standards matter even more right now, in the wake of State Department efforts to reshape “human rights” through a narrow religious lens.

The U.N. review reaffirms principles of fairness and equality, shines light on the truth of U.S. violations, and provides a blueprint for future advocacy—an opportunity all Christians of conscience can welcome in our striving for greater justice. ♦

Allyson McKinney Timm, founder of Justice Revival, is a theologically trained human rights lawyer and elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

I

MY CHURCH AND HARVEY WEINSTEIN

In 1998, I was 24 years old and had just been hired as an assistant to Harvey Weinstein, one of the most powerful men in Hollywood. Within two months, my new boss attempted to rape me in a hotel at the Venice Film Festival.

I wanted to report Weinstein to his superiors; instead I was silenced by an egregious and restrictive nondisclosure agreement that prevented me from speaking to family, friends, doctors, lawyers, or therapists about what happened. I was imprisoned in this silence for 20 years.

Two years after *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* broke the Harvey Weinstein story, I broke my nondisclosure agreement. I also published an op-ed in *The New York Times*: “Harvey Weinstein Told Me He Liked Chinese Girls.”

I was deluged with messages of support from the Asian American community, from the Christian community, and a few from the intersection of the two. One message from a member of my home church stopped me in my tracks: “I’m so sorry you felt unable to share your struggles with us, back in the day. I wish we had been able to pray with you.”

Nondisclosure agreement aside, could I have come to my church for support at the time of the assault?

When I was a bullied 15-year-old coming to terms with my Asian identity, my Chinese church was a life raft in a complicated world, providing connection, love, warmth, and a sense of belonging. My home church formed my faith, my identity, and, in short, me.

Yet, in a “model minority family” you do not make a fuss. No complaining, work hard, keep your head down. I observed even then that support flowed more easily to congregants on a conventional social path—those who dated one person and married young. Support was less readily available for out-



liers like me, the culturally and socially unconventional.

One subject of shame, silence, and stigma in church was sex. Premarital sex was frowned upon and presumed nonexistent. But premarital sex was more prevalent than the church acknowledged; the silence around premarital sex meant postnuptial sex wasn’t openly discussed either. If talk of sex in healthy relationships was discouraged, imagine how difficult it was to discuss sex in unhealthy relationships.

In a culture of silence, where can young people turn for support when the unimaginable happens? The #MeToo movement reveals that rape and sexual assault are far more prevalent than we knew. How can we teach young people the value that sex should be preserved for the sanctity of marriage without simultaneously making them naïve to and unprepared for the realities of a sex-aware world with power differentials, where the risk of sexual assault is ever-present?

The power model between pastor and congregants in Asian churches often mirrors that of a parent and child. We need to break down this imbalance. It sends a powerful message to show someone who is considered “subordinate” to you—whether congregant or child—that you can admit fault or vulnerability. Only then can healing begin in church and at home, where people love deepest and trust the most.

If you struggle in silence with an experience of assault, find one person who can join you in coming to God with your experience in prayer. I kept my secret for two decades. Going public has helped me to find my voice, which has been transformative. ✦

**“IN A CULTURE OF
SILENCE, WHERE
CAN YOUNG PEOPLE
TURN FOR SUPPORT
WHEN THE
UNIMAGINABLE
HAPPENS?”**

Rowena Chiu, a former assistant to Harvey Weinstein, left the film industry after suffering sexual assault in 1998. She lives in Palo Alto, Calif., with her husband and four children.

FINDING HOPE IN 'THE NEW DARK AGES'

3



Earlier this year, I almost did not finish writing the sermon I was scheduled to preach at a special Martin Luther King Jr. Day Social Justice Shabbat service. Usually, I am able to bring sermons to a close without problem; this time, I struggled. Really struggled. Instead of focusing thematically on racism, poverty, war, or any number of issues King spoke out against, I had decided to preach on fear. I felt called to name fear as the root issue beneath so many others, something we struggle with individually and collectively. Fear of scarcity, fear of the unknown, fear of the “other”: the immigrant, the unarmed black person, the queer, the Sikh, the Muslim, the Jew, or the white person now encountering you in your queer, black, immigrant, brown, Muslim, Sikh, or Jewish body.

I found that once I started being honest about the fears we hold and the fears we face, I could barely turn the corner, in a manner of speaking, toward hope.

Eventually, I was able to theologically pivot my sermon and conclude positively. However, that experience of being spiritually stumped with writer’s block said more to me than any happy ending ever will. Rather than yielding answers, my sermon gave me questions, which continue to resonate in the midst of a global pandemic.

**“FOR ‘WE WHO BELIEVE IN
FREEDOM,’ WHAT IS THE PLACE
OF FEAR IN THE LIFE
OF FAITH?”**

What is the line between realism and despair? What is the place of fear in the life of faith, particularly for “we who believe in freedom,” as Ella Baker put it?

Growing up, I saw King as an eternal optimist whose dream of justice forbade fear and precluded despair. Today, I understand King’s justice as inviting in those realities and the humans who struggle with them. Current conversations on the sanitization of King’s politics might also extend to our King-inspired theologies of justice. Visions of justice and faith inattentive to fear and untroubled by despair ignore our humanity and the lived theology arising from people’s actual engagement with King’s legacy.

Two years ago, I joined a group of college students at Clark Atlanta University for a book discussion hosted by the office of religious life. In the novel *Dear Martin*, by Nic Stone, high school student Justyce writes letters of outcry to King against an unfolding backdrop of killings of unarmed black teens. To close the discussion, we wrote our own letters to King, echoing Justyce and a professor I had in seminary who, for decades following King’s death, annually wrote King on his birthday to wrestle with developments in racial justice.

Over the past year, I have turned repeatedly to “The New Dark Ages,” a poem from Alice Walker’s 2018 poetry collection. Although the title initially drew me (what a refreshingly precise statement of our times!), I revisit the poem’s narrative journey. In this poem dedicated “for Martin,” Walker puts King in conversation with our wayward, winding, unforeseeable future, which she describes as a “darkness” that “we may not emerge from ... in my lifetime.” Yet, in this darkness, despair is not a dead end to faith or justice, but a starting point. It is here that King’s path appears, beckoning our doubting, fearful selves on with the reminder (evoking John 1:5 and a certain Sunday school song made famous by the civil rights movement): In times of darkness, we are the light. ✕

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a United Methodist deacon who writes theological aesthetics, practices the arts, and works in faith-based social justice in Washington, D.C.

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SOUL WORK BY CAROLINA HINOJOSA-CISNEROS

LESSONS FROM THE GARDEN



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My grandmother came to me in a dream. It was the first day of the COVID-19 pandemic and I knew I would not be able to visit her. My daughter had just come down with pneumonia; I did not want to put my grandmother at risk. When she came to me in my dream, through

the front window, covered in a thin curtain, I could see her shadow as she walked onto my porch. As I neared the door, through the window I could see that she did not knock but instead walked over to the flowers on my porch. They were a gift from her to me. She touched each one and leaned in close as if in conversation with them. She never turned to knock on my door. I woke up.

I called my grandmother to recount the dream. She told me she had hoped I was taking care of the plants. *Ruda* (rue), *sábila* (aloe vera), and *Corona de Cristo* (Christ plant) adorn my front porch. I've since added

**"IN THESE TIMES, SURVIVAL
WILL DEPEND ON HOW WE TREAT
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rosemary, jade, and a few others. Care of the earth has always been imperative. In our current times, survival will depend on how we treat what God created to meet our basic needs.

Our capitalistic and technologically advanced society teaches us to have our finger on the pulse, to be ahead of the game. Gardening teaches us to wait with faithful endurance. We were created with the capacity to wait. Care for our environment is considered "justice work" when it should be common practice. I've started to scoop out water from our sinks and bathtubs to water our plants, in an effort to conserve. The labor is daunting, and there are days I am too tired to scoop. In the grand scheme of things, it seems I'm not contributing much, but the grass is content and so are my plants. The earth rejoices.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, the future is unpredictable. Schools have shut down, school courses have migrated online, countries have shut their borders to those of us from the United States. (Oh, how the tables have turned!) We may not wake from this mess, but we will learn from it. We will learn what it means to care for our neighbor, care for the earth, help the widow, and supply for the orphan. Faith will call us into a deep action—if it has not already, in the face of such wickedness as children separated from their parents at our southern border. Our Christian teaching will center its greatest message for us: "Love [and care for] one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." ✕

Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros is a Tejana, Chicana, and Mujerista from San Antonio, Texas, where she is a graduate student at Our Lady of the Lake University. She is the 2019 Recipient of the Rubem Alves Award in Theopoeitics.



WHO IS INVITED TO THE TABLE?



In my own interreligious instruction, I have become aware of the lack of discussion of Indigenous traditions. The very way knowledge is conceived of is at play here. Margaret Kovach articulates an Indigenous epistemology in her essay “Emerging from the Margins” as “fluid, non-linear, and relational. Knowledge is transmitted through stories that shape shift in relation to the wisdom of the storyteller at the time of the telling.”

As I have engaged Indigenous communities and scholarly voices in my work, I have sought to:

Bust up the category of religion. By this I mean I try to interrogate how interreligious encounters define religion and who is invited to the table, or what parts of a person we invite.

Since I teach at a Christian seminary, religion as defined by doctrinal and scriptural sources takes precedence. I found that many of my Christian students—for instance, those from Tonga—had a deep connection to Indigenous practices woven into their identity. But at seminary this aspect was reduced to “culture” and not given a place at the table. I learned to ask students to self-identify

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and opened the space to recognize that all forms of their spiritual practice were valid sources of scholarship. They were not asked to cancel or erase parts of their spiritual practice that were considered by others as less important.

Do not presume “incoherence” of Indigenous belief systems. Increasingly, as a transnational eye is brought into this area of theological education, this topic will find its way into the classroom and penetrate the potentially limiting constructs of interreligious education. The danger here is that while the definition of religion may be expanded, its curious genesis remains in the particularities of a set form.

Newer landscapes that are created still carry this litmus test, and ironically so. It is the more recently born traditions that insist on the particularities of what a religion looks like, while ancient practices and their very coherent genealogies are cast aside.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s work addresses the processes by which the academy has relentlessly marginalized the bodies, knowledge, and voices of Indigenous communities; it would be a pity to see interreligious education repeat these dynamics. Newer traditions can think about what theological humility means. For instance, the Ifa tradition has developed a well-articulated theology of interreligious engagement with Muslims in particular, since the tradition predates the advent of Islam to Nigeria.

When working across traditions or with people who may embody commitments to various cosmologies and theologies, engagement should not start with a “lesser than” mentality. There is much to be learned about how religion can be opened up as a category and about how our particular lenses influence who is seen as valid to come to the interfaith table and who is not. ✕

Najeeba Syeed has been recognized for her work in interfaith peacebuilding, restorative justice, and religious leadership in Muslim contexts. She is co-editor of a forthcoming volume on interreligious learning and theological education.

EYEWITNESS

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**"WHILE WE'RE
SERVING A LOT OF
PEOPLE, THERE'S NOT
AS MUCH LAUGHTER."**

FEEDING THOSE WHO CAN'T SHELTER-IN-PLACE

"Most of our volunteers are senior citizens, but in early March we had to ask them not to come. At the same time, phone calls to the church were increasing: 'Is your food pantry still happening?' We didn't know what we were going to do, so we put it out on Instagram to the community, like, 'Hey, we need volunteers, and if you're not immunocompromised, please consider coming out and helping.' And we had a great response.

We've served record numbers of people at our food pantry, and our volunteer base is not from the church; it's young hipsters, real estate agents, and people who are themselves food insecure but are wanting to pay it forward. We can't give out hot meals anymore, because if we do, people naturally gather and congregate. The whole thing has become a lot less personal. While we're serving a lot of people, there's not as much laughter.

We have one unhoused transgender individual who recently started attending church services and Bible studies; they said over and over again how much a welcoming community was doing for their mental and physical health. I've been texting regularly with this person, who has an autoimmune disease and is now in quarantine at a big rescue mission in downtown Los Angeles. It's suspected they're going to test positive for the coronavirus. The worst part about this for them is not the pain of the sickness that they're going through, it's a loss of community and a feeling of aloneness, isolation." ❖

Kyle Joachim is pastor of Silverlake Community Church in Los Angeles. He spoke with *Sojourners* senior associate editor Betsy Shirley about how coronavirus has affected the homeless ministry his church offers in partnership with SELAH Neighborhood Homeless Coalition (selahnhc.org).





*We are not people of fear:
We are people of courage.*

*We are not people
who protect our own safety:
we are people
who protect our neighbors' safety.*

*We are not people of greed:
we are people of generosity.*

*We are your people God,
giving and loving,
wherever we are,
whatever it costs*

*For as long as it takes
wherever you call us.*

Prayer by Barbara Glasson, president of the Methodist Conference, Britain

Illustration by Ale De la Torre







The solution to rural America's identity crisis isn't found in stereotypes and propaganda; it's in building relationships.

By MATTHEW HILDRETH / Illustrations by CLARE LOUISE MALLISON

Organizing

It was cold—even for northwest Iowa in November. And I was late.

I thought I could make up time if I took the back way, a route I'd driven many times before. But the one-lane bridge across the Rock River was out and, judging by the abandoned construction site, it hadn't been open for a while. I had moved away four years earlier and was a little behind on local traffic patterns.

To locals, the region surrounding the Big Sioux River drainage basin—stretching across parts of Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Minnesota—is known as “Siouxland.” To most Americans, this is flyover country.

I grew up in Siouxland, crisscrossing the region for family gatherings, 4-H horse shows, and trail rides, but I knew my time there was limited. Through TV, I learned about life in the big city and what the rest of the country thought of hicks, hillbillies, and hayseeds like me. I learned that to be successful, I had to leave. And so, like many of my classmates, I left as soon as I could.

the Heartland



I went to college in Minneapolis and pursued a career in media; after graduation I spent time in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C., working on shows such as *Monday Night Football* and *Good Morning America*.

But on the morning of May 12, 2008, everything changed: Hundreds of federal agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement raided an Iowa meatpacking plant, arresting 389 community members. At the time, I was a media producer for Sojourners, so I traveled to Iowa to cover the humanitarian response organized by Sister Mary McCauley, parish administrator of the local Catholic church.

Within hours of the raid, Sister McCauley had the entire community of 2,269 residents organized. When I interviewed her a few days later, the church was full of

children still waiting to be reunited with their families. The church's fellowship hall was filled with clothes, meals, and supplies for the children; community volunteers worked through legal paperwork on behalf of those detained. In a moment of complete chaos, community members rose to the challenge and stood together with their neighbors. It was at this point I realized the power of rural organizing. I was hooked.

Leveraging the gifts of the community

In March, as the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus erupted around the world, rural hospitals in the U.S. faced a particularly grim reality: Like hospitals across the nation, they faced a shortage of personal protective



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equipment such as N-95 masks and gowns. But unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, rural hospitals were already struggling. According to a 2017 study, 41 percent of rural hospitals operate at a loss, a result of decreasing Medicare reimbursements, more patients with underlying conditions, and fewer patients with private insurance. “We’re stretched thin as it is,” one hospital CEO told the *Washington Post*. “We’ll improvise and make it work however we can.”

As cases of COVID-19 skyrocketed, I thought about McCauley and all the organizers like her that I’ve met in the 12 years since the Postville immigration raid. Many of the best community organizers I know would never give themselves that title. They don’t work for a campaign or an organization. Often, they’re just everyday folks who believe their community is worth fighting for.

I met some of these everyday folks on that cold day back in November. After a 20-minute detour to find a working bridge, I finally arrived at my destination: the Fruited Plain Cafe, a coffee shop on the main drag in Sioux Center, Iowa. Like many communities in the state, Sioux Center has experienced a rapid demographic change due to a large influx of agricultural workers from Mexico and Central America. Just a generation ago, nearly all the town’s residents would have claimed Dutch heritage. Today, 36 percent of the children in the school district are minorities, the majority of them Latino.

The cafe—which converted its rear storage room into a small performance venue—regularly hosts Bible studies, political rallies, and indie rock shows, including concerts by The Ruralists, a band started by cafe owner Laremy De Vries, his two neighbors, and a drummer from the local high school. But that day the cafe was hosting the launch of RuralOrganizing.org, a new national organization dedicated to building progressive change in rural America.

As I assembled the digital slide projector and arranged the chairs into a circle, I reflected on how the area had changed. The last time I was here, I lived in a town with a population of 800 in a remote corner of the district represented by Steve King, a U.S. member of Congress who often made national news for his white nationalist rhetoric. But over the past four years, northwest Iowa residents had made progress. They started public LGBTQIA pride events. Local law enforcement officials implemented pro-immigrant policing policies. The state’s Republican leaders disavowed Rep. King. All this would have been almost unthinkable four years ago, but these days it’s not unique to northwest Iowa.

The launch party at the Fruited Plain was unforgettable. Nearly 100 rural leaders from around Siouxland—including small business owners, pastors, advocates, and even some candidates seeking elected office—spent the day discussing strategies for positive local change. We talked about how most politicians favor larger metropolitan areas despite the need for policies that address rural problems. We explored ideas for investing in small local businesses and enacting policies that support rural grocery stores, pharmacies, and clinics.

And in the evening, in front of a crowd of Anglo and

Latino community members, The Ruralists and Che Apalache—a Grammy-nominated bluegrass band featuring Latin American musicians—brought down the house.

At its heart, this is what community organizing is all about. Community organizers equip people to leverage their own gifts and affirm the gifts of others in pursuit of the common good. They solve local and global problems by creating unity and affirming diversity among seemingly unrelated groups of individuals.

‘White, conservative, and dumb’

Since 2016, without a full grasp of the dramatic transformations taking place outside our cities and suburbs, much of the media has embraced President Donald Trump as a defining symbol of rural America. They developed analyses based on stereotypes that rural people are white, conservative, and dumb and ignored anyone who didn’t fit the narrative.

This shortsighted analysis mirrors a blind spot in our civic infrastructure. Take health care: As U.S. hospitals began facing the coronavirus pandemic, rural communities had an older population with smaller hospitals, many of which lacked intensive care units. This blind spot extends to philanthropy, too: In a 2015 study for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, economist John L. Pender found that only 6 to 7 percent of all foundation grant dollars go to rural areas, even though rural areas represent 19 percent of the U.S. population.

Instead of providing rural-specific solutions to rural-specific problems, such as a lack of access to health care, candidates create campaign strategies based on stereotypes. On the Right, politicians such as King in Iowa, Kris Kobach in Kansas, and Jim Jordan in Ohio spread lies and ignite fears among the rural electorate to promote their own political agenda. On the Left, Democrats fall for stereotype-based punditry, with political candidates either outright ignoring rural voters (think Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign) or watering down progressive messages to seem more like Republicans.

As a result, rural voters—Democrats, Republicans, and independents—are the most often misunderstood voters in American politics. This is particularly important given that rural and small-town voters have a disproportionate impact on our national politics: Today, half of the U.S. population lives in just nine states. That means half of the national population shares 18 senators. Meanwhile, the other half of the country’s population shares the remaining 82 seats in the Senate. When Republicans and Democrats both engaged small-town and rural communities, this bias affected the parties equally. Today, however, the Republican Party has become disproportionately rural and the Democratic Party disproportionately urban, which means a red vote now has more clout than a blue one.

But most of the stereotypes about rural voters are wrong: Rural doesn’t mean white. The majority of Indigenous Americans (54 percent) and a quarter of African Americans live in small cities, towns, and rural communities. Between 2000 and 2010, the Asian American

HALF OF THE U.S. POPULATION IS REPRESENTED BY 18 SENATORS. THE OTHER HALF HAS 82 SEATS IN THE SENATE.

population of rural communities grew by 37 percent; the Hispanic population grew by 46 percent.

And rural areas aren’t necessarily conservative. According to data from the Pew Research Center, rural voters’ partisan affiliation was equally divided between Democrats and Republicans from 1999 to 2009. After the 2016 election, the GOP emerged with a 16-percentage-point advantage among rural voters. The 2018 midterm elections, however, demonstrated the power of small grassroots investment in strategic rural engagement: A Reuters analysis found that Democrats increased their share of rural votes in more than 50 congressional districts. Even in two Iowa districts that voted for Trump in 2016, Democrats came out on top.

Granted, some of the narratives we hear about small towns are true. The U.S. has rapidly transformed from a rural and agricultural nation into an urbanized and industrialized one. In 1900, 40 percent of the U.S. population lived in urban areas, compared with more than 80 percent today. That means just one in five residents of the U.S. call rural America home, despite it making up 97 percent of the country’s land mass. As a result of this dramatic change, rural America is in the middle of an economic and identity crisis that is reshaping American politics.

The antidote to propaganda

More than any political pundit, theorist, or pollster today, the late French philosopher, sociologist, and theologian Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) has shaped my understanding of the invisible fault lines in our current political landscape. When Ellul was born, nearly 255 million people lived in urban areas. By the time he wrote his first book in 1946, about 746 million people lived in cities.

Ellul understood industrialization, urbanization, and automation as components of a system striving for “absolute efficiency” in “every field of human activity.” He believed the pursuit of such efficiency created alienation—a feeling that creates fertile ground for political manipulation. “The permanent uncertainty, the social mobility, the absence of sociological protection and of traditional frame of reference,” he wrote, “all these inevitably provide propaganda with a malleable environment that can be fed information from the outside and conditioned at will.”

Sound familiar? If Ellul were alive today, I'm sure he'd have a lot to say about the current state of our public discourse.

But Ellul doesn't just assess democratic decay; he also provides valuable insights for anyone looking to overcome it. "An individual can be influenced by forces such as propaganda," Ellul says, "only when he is cut off from membership in local groups." In other words, Ellul sees authentic, organic relationships as the antidote to propaganda. Or as he puts it: "Propaganda ceases where simple dialogue begins."

Organizing, like all other aspects of modern life, has been automated and optimized. One-on-one conversations have been replaced by mass, impersonal emails. Phone calls have been replaced by artificial intelligence-generated text message programs. As a result, locally rooted community organizing has been replaced by organizational agendas, public opinion polling, and politics rather than conversations with our neighbors.

While these tactics can be tempting for organizers short on time and resources, they also risk reinforcing the very system we are working to overcome. The solution to propaganda isn't better propaganda. The solution to propaganda is authentic, organic relationships.

A new way across the river

Communities that have invested in building authentic bonds across traditional cultural divides have created civic resilience that enables them to make progress at the local level, despite the current partisan climate. Often, these bonds are the result of survival as civic investments have been drained from remote areas.

And that is what's working in Sioux County. Leaders there have rooted their efforts firmly in authentic relationships and dialogue. These conversations, like in any small town, happen organically at places such as the Fruited Plain. Harold Heie, a former Christian college professor and administrator, has taken this idea to a new level through his website RespectfulConversation.net, where he models—and teaches others to facilitate—intentional discussions among folks who disagree about controversial public issues, both digitally and face-to-face. In a recent series of discussions, Heie brought together eight Sioux County Christians who vary in their support for the Trump administration.

On his website, Heie writes that the purpose of these conversations is to "seek a better way to engage those with whom we disagree." And he will be the first to tell you that this kind of exchange is not a tool of persuasion; even after a dozen intense, intentional community conversations among the participants in the group discussing Trump, there was little agreement—except that our political discourse is broken and real dialogue is hard work.

Heie and his neighbors successfully created a safe and welcoming space to express disagreements while also building a local culture that still values human connection. There's little doubt in my mind that this culture is responsible for much of the forward momentum in the

RURAL AMERICA IS IN THE MIDDLE OF AN ECONOMIC AND IDENTITY CRISIS THAT IS RESHAPING AMERICAN POLITICS.

community. Sure, sometimes relationship-based change takes longer and sometimes conversations themselves don't make tangible progress. But authentic relationships across traditional lines of difference create the right conditions for movements to emerge.

Similar efforts are taking shape across the country. In Nelsonville, Ohio—in a region that has been rocked by poverty and addiction—local leaders host a community dinner every Thursday for the sole purpose of building bridging relationships across cultural and economic divides. These dinners have unleashed a wave of civic engagement that is transforming the local political landscape.

Likewise, in Martinsville, Ind., leaders have rooted their local initiatives in community dinners. As community members became aware of local environmental issues, they worked to clean up a 38-acre superfund site and send postcards to their representatives and the EPA in support of policies that would benefit their community.

Even in my hometown of Brookings, S.D., community members concerned about the Trump administration's immigration policies hosted weekly meals and English classes with members of the undocumented community. It's no coincidence that a state lawmaker there, a Republican, introduced legislation—with strong community support—to provide driver's examinations in Spanish for the local immigrant population.

With the dramatic polarization in our politics and the temptation to take shortcuts with automated organizing, relationships generated through gatherings such as these seem almost radical.

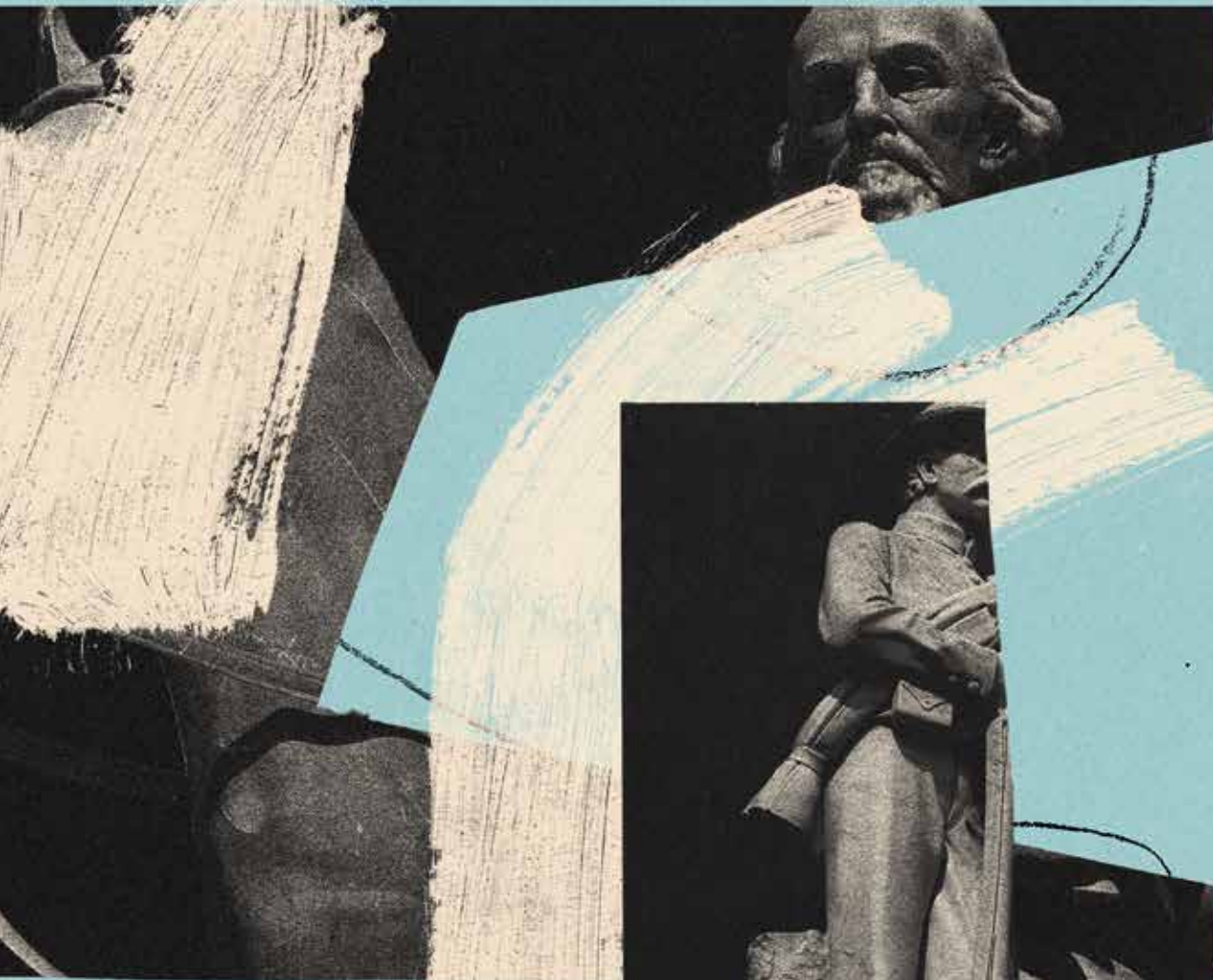
But relationships are what we do in rural America. We know if we empower and equip rural leaders to build local relationships, identify challenges and solutions from within their communities, develop positive political agendas that prioritize their interests, and mobilize support for legislation, they have the experience and expertise to develop rural-specific solutions for rural-specific problems and rebuild rural communities that are empowered, thriving, and equitable.

We just need to find a new way across the river. ♦

Matthew Hildreth, who grew up on a small farm in eastern South Dakota, is the executive director of RuralOrganizing.org.

‘Grinding Idols into Dust’ Begins Here





**Bible studies at the base
of Confederate monuments
revealed the false gods in our
public spaces.**

By Melissa Florer-Bixler





Every day, before the coronavirus had us sheltering in place, I drove by a Confederate monument on the state capitol grounds near my home in Raleigh, N.C. It was unveiled in 1895 by the granddaughter of Stonewall Jackson, Julia Jackson Christian. Its 75-foot-tall granite column is a fixture of the landscape as people walk past on their way to work or sit on benches beneath its shadow, the shaft marked with the words “to our Confederate dead.”

The monument is strategically placed to assure maximum visibility. Everything about it is purposeful and planned. It makes a claim on the space—claiming the ground, the air, the power of public land with a particular version of history.

“To our confederate dead.” But the question that burns on the stone: Who does “our” represent?

Injustice, idolatry, and repentance

In 2019, Charlottesville, Va., was still reeling from the August 2017 Unite the Right weekend during which counter-protester Heather Heyer was killed by a white nationalist. Two local Methodist pastors—Rev. Isaac Collins and Rev. Phil Woodson—decided to gather community members for a weekly Bible study aimed at reinterpreting the Confederate monuments that mark Charlottesville’s

public space. They called it “Swords into Plowshares: What the Bible says about injustice, idolatry, and repentance.”

The inspiration came from Jalane Schmidt, a public historian and religious studies professor at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, who has co-led truth-telling tours of the monuments since 2018. Schmidt suggested Collins take up the work of theological interrogation of the history embedded in these monuments and how this history lives on in the churches and Christians in their city.

So, for two months people gathered to study the stories of idolatry in the Bible alongside the history of white supremacy set into the stone and concrete of Charlottesville’s monuments.

After reading about the Bible study in Virginia, I joined with another Raleigh pastor last fall to begin a similar study in our home state of North Carolina. Rev. Chalice Overy, associate pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, and I had watched what happened in Charlottesville in 2017 with shock and horror. But tensions in our state were also high. In August 2017, protesters in Durham forcibly removed a Confederate statue from the entrance to a downtown building. One year later, after months of student sit-ins, student protesters tore down “Silent Sam,” a statue erected in 1913 by the University of North Carolina and the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

Rev. Overy and I knew it was time for a public conversation with other Christians about the monuments on the capitol grounds in Raleigh. Almost all these monuments are to Confederate soldiers and slave owners. How could our faith inform our understanding of the history built into our public spaces? What stories do they reiterate, which version of history do they center?

Shifting the focus from slavery

Overy and I researched the 75-foot-tall monument and five others on the grounds of the capitol, uncovering racism, historical distortion, and re-narration of the past that attempted to secure a flourishing white future while scapegoating black citizens. Each week for six weeks we linked one of the monuments with a story of idolatry from the Hebrew Bible. In discovering the lure, risk, and devastation Israel faced among the “gods of these lands” (2 Kings 18:35), we encountered Southern history that turned memorial stones into idols to a white supremacist god.

The monument “to our Confederate

dead,” where we began our Bible studies, was endorsed by the state legislature in 1892, nearly three decades after the end of the Civil War. Over those many years prior there had been no formal push to memorialize the North Carolinian Confederate soldiers who died in the war.

So, what changed? Why was this issue raised a generation later?

Here, history becomes politics. In the early 1890s, factionalism and distrust grew among white farmers who believed that the Democrat-controlled legislature was no longer meeting their interests. An economic downturn provided a window for a shift in power. Soon after, the Southern Democrats called for the construction of the Confederate monument to “our” dead.

The monument created the myth of a common solidarity between white Southerners. It bound them together in suffering a humiliating loss and thousands of casualties during the Civil War. The monument implied that freed black citizens were the cause of whites’ woes. It shifted the focus from slavery, the real cause of the Civil War, to states’ rights. Historians would later call this the “Lost Cause” narration.

More than 100 years later, we stood on the spot where Col. Alfred Moore Waddell, famed for his oration on the Democratic campaign trail promoting the party’s single platform of “white supremacy,” addressed the crowd at the monument’s unveiling. I read his statement aloud. We could hear the whitewashing of history:

[Slavery] was an institution, guaranteed and protected by the Constitution, as exclusively within the control of the State, and when the equality and reserved rights of the States were attacked by interference with it, there was just ground to believe that other preserved and guaranteed rights would be assailed, and the equality of the States destroyed.

Worshipping the idols of their captors

The Democrats were briefly out of power in the mid-1890s, but in 1898 they regained control of the North Carolina state legislature. Over the next 10 years they divided the state on racial lines, disenfranchised black voters, and enacted horrifying and repressive Jim and Jane Crow laws.

Overy opened her Bible to Exodus. She read aloud the story of a people left at the foot of a mountain. Moses, the one they trusted, the one who led them out of slavery in Egypt, had disappeared above to



the cloudy peak. The people left behind were afraid. What would become of them? What if Moses didn't return?

They turned to Aaron and directed him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us." They needed a god they could see. They knew what gods should look like. They erected a golden calf, one with striking resemblance to the Egyptian bull god, Apis, homage to the gods of their enslavers.

The golden calf offered them a sense of identity—at the cost of warping their view of the past and distorting their future. The gods of Egypt were woven into the Hebrews' enslavement and oppression. Now, freed by the hand of the living God, the people returned to worshiping the idols of their captors.

Standing before this monument to white supremacy, to "our" confederate dead, I recalled God's first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me."

It's not obvious why God would command this. Who could possibly get hurt by worshipping a silly, false god?

But here, before us in this circle, we saw what happens when a people worship the terror of their past. We understood what happens when we put our assurance in a distorted version of history. History acts upon us—and monuments, which become our gods, are its most indelible form.

What monuments hide

Over the weeks, Overy and I met people who told us they were surprised at what they'd learned in our Bible study. The history of these stones had been hidden. We had not been told these stories in school. We walked by these monuments, these idols, and they became part of the scenery. A monument to white women who lost sons in battle, even as those sons were raised by enslaved women of African descent. A monument to the so-called "education governor," Charles B. Aycock, who used his power to create a caste system of segregated schools, assuring that the children of freed slaves would have subpar opportunities for advancement.

In each Bible study we would trace the thread between the disenfranchisement of black citizens in the 1890s to North Carolina's current state politics. We are the inheritors of these gods of white supremacy who mark our public spaces. Racialized gerrymandering, constitutional amendments to require voter identification, erosion of public education—all of this is bound up in how history is told. It towered above us in the monuments

Confederate monuments tell our children a distorted "history" of a fictive white struggle for state autonomy.

at our state capitol, prominent for all to see.

Most visitors to North Carolina's state capitol are schoolchildren. The monuments are used to teach Confederate valor to our children, generation after generation. We orient ourselves around Confederate monuments that tell a distorted "history" of a fictive white struggle for state autonomy. Confederate monuments inhibit the possibility of mourning and repenting that can only follow truth-telling.

Learning to repent

As Christians, Overy and I knew that we needed a different story, a redemptive story. We needed to learn how to tell the truth, rooted in the stories of God's people, a people formed to resist the idols of the land.

After Moses returned from the mountain, after he found the people worshipping the god of their enslavers, he broke the golden calf to pieces. He burned the wrecked statue, ground the ashes into a fine powder, then sprinkled them into water. He gave this water to the Israelites to drink.

As part of each Bible study, we asked people to reflect in small groups on the interplay between biblical idolatry and the idolatry of white supremacy preserved in our Confederate monuments. A Lutheran pastor shared with a member from St. Ambrose, one of Raleigh's historic black Episcopal churches. A man on his lunch break spoke with a lawyer and a Mennonite pediatrician. Passersby on vacation from the Virgin Islands decided to join in.

Each week we would take history into our bodies, drink it in, let it work through us. We made space to encounter a past that is never past to our politics today. Each week we would drink deeply.

Over time we witnessed the unfolding history of the Israelites as they were tempted by idols. We learned the persistence of truth-telling and repentance. We saw them mock the prophets of Baal and pen bruising words for those who sent their children off to be sacrificed to the god Molech. We read these stories in the shadow of the idols erected by our ancestors. We learned to repent.

At the close of each study we formed a circle around the object of our research and history. Together we prayed a litany based on the words of the South African pastor Alan Paton:

Let us not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong. Help us not be afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich. Show us where love, hope, and faith are needed, and use us to bring them to places of struggle. Open our eyes and ears so that we may do the work given us to do.

In North Carolina, the GOP-led state legislature has eliminated the rights of local municipalities to control their own futures, including the removal of Confederate monuments.

We also know that "grinding idols into dust" begins here. ✱

Melissa Florer-Bixler, author of *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament*, is pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church in North Carolina.

A BEACON OF HOPE FROM SOUTH ASIA

By Daniel Sunkari

Illustration by

Nabigal-Nayagam Haider Ali



“What’s *your* caste, Daniel?”

Glancing around my sixth-grade history classroom, I knew my answer to the teacher’s question wouldn’t mean anything to my American peers. It hardly meant anything to me, a South Asian kid. As years passed, I heard murmurs about controversy surrounding the teaching of the Hindu caste system in our classrooms. And in 2017, I watched California’s board of education vote to approve history textbooks that erased key aspects of a 3,000-year-old system of apartheid that presently affects almost 2 billion people around the world.

Caste is personal, systemic, violent, and subtle—all at once. Dalits, caste-oppressed people formerly known as “untouchables,” know this too well. As Dalit theologian and Christian minister Dr. Sunder John Boopalan told me, caste is the “oldest surviving form of anti-human oppression.”

How does caste work? Why does it matter? What do we do about it?

The best teachers on this subject are those who have persisted, resisted, and found God amid the brunt of caste oppression. Dalit liberation theology exists as a beacon of hope against crushing evil, calling all of humanity to see God, freedom, and ourselves in a renewed way.

CASTE AS AN ORIGIN STORY

In a 2016 interview, civil rights activist Ruby Sales said that every theology should have “hindsight, insight, and foresight.” Using hindsight, we often find that oppression is rooted in the origin stories we tell.

The origin story of caste goes back to the ancient roots of Hinduism—more accurately called Brahminism—honed over centuries by upper-caste groups seeking to



THE DALITS, THE SO-CALLED "UNTOUCHABLES" OF THE CASTE SYSTEM, HAVE A LOT TO TEACH US ABOUT RESILIENCE, INCARNATION, AND JESUS' LIBERATING WORD.



maintain social and political power and further entrenched by British colonial forces. The creation story in the Purusha Sukta tells of a primeval god sacrificing himself to create the world. Varnas, or castes, emerge from different parts of his body. Brahmins (priests and scholars) originate from his head, Kshatriyas (warriors and administrators) from his arms, Vaishyas (farmers and merchants) from his thighs, and Shudras (laborers and servants) from his feet. This hierarchical system ranks people according to purity and assigns their occupations.

Rather than simply differentiating between “us” and “them,” caste determines human value. And beneath the body of the divine lies those the caste system treats as inherently inhuman: Dalits and Adivasis. Adivasis are the Indigenous people of the Indian subcontinent, who share common roots with Dalits.

“Caste sustained itself for 3,000 years on theological grounds,” said Dalit theologian and pastor Joseph Prabhakar Dayam. Just as one might appeal to the biblical narrative of *imago dei* creation to derive value, the Brahminical origin story determines human worth—and worthlessness—within the framework of caste. This origin story was digested, reproduced, and institutionalized, infecting every conceivable corner of Indian life.



In Sanskrit, Dalit means “crushed” or “broken.” Relegated to society’s margins, Dalits are forced to work jobs such as manual scavenging and handling of dead bodies. They are systematically barred from participating in basic activities and institutions. In his 1936 essay “Annihilation of Caste,” Dalit reformer B.R. Ambedkar depicted how Dalits were even condemned for walking, salivating, eating, and learning, for fear that they would pollute upper-caste people.

Though this practice of “untouchability” is now illegal in India, Nepal, and Pakistan, it continues to tangibly affect 300 million Dalits daily. Dalit activist Martin Macwan calls it a “slow genocide.” If you’d like proof, type “Dalit” into Google News and read the results. Within the last year alone, Dalits of all ages have been brutalized, lynched, and raped for acts such as eating, defecating, and marrying outside of their caste.

Caste is all-encompassing, influencing all of South Asian society. Someone’s caste



can be identified by their name, choice of food, clothing, neighborhood, marriage, and more. As South Asians migrate, caste oppression goes with them, whether to Fiji, Sri Lanka, Guyana, or the U.S. Although often ignored, caste cannot be absent from any meaningful analysis related to South Asian people—including the topic of Christianity.

ERASED FROM CHURCH HISTORY

“So, you’re Indian *and* Christian?” Every Indian Christian in the diaspora has heard this question. The assumption is that the “exotic, esoteric” Indian identity and the otherwise colonial, “civilized” Christian identity are irreconcilable. Indian Christians themselves have struggled to accommodate the cultural influence of Hinduism to a “white man’s” Christianity.

When Christianity arrived in what is now the Indian state of Kerala 2,000 years ago, it hardly expanded beyond the region—largely due to caste boundaries. Dalit theologian Arvind P. Nirmal, known by many as “the father of Dalit theology,” drew sharp distinctions between theologies of Dalits and non-Dalit Indian Christians, noting that “until the 1970s, Indian Christian theology was developed mainly by [caste-privileged] converts to Christianity.” In their attempts to formulate an Indian Christian theology, Nirmal asserted, these converts actually propagated the Brahminic caste system, creating a “Brahminical Christianity.” Though inculturation is usually a helpful adaptation of faith, caste short-circuited this process.

Nirmal's claim exposes the overt and covert syncretism embedded in popular Indian Christian theology. Because Dalit voices—which were mainly concerned with freedom—were not prioritized when constructing most traditional Indian Christian theology, many religious practices and gatherings still involve casteism today. Dayam, a pastor in the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, told me that his denomination's archival material only mentions “upper-caste” Indians, even though the church was predominantly Dalit. “As Dalits, we had the challenge of writing ourselves into the larger Christian narrative of the nation, which was absent until then,” said Dayam.



For Dalits, caste-infused Christianity was merely a substitution for Europe's colonial Christianity—not any more authentic nor accessible. But throughout the last century, foreign and Indian Christian missionary efforts spurred mass conversions in South Indian Dalit communities. (Many other Dalits have sought liberation from the caste system through conversion to Buddhism or Islam.) In a way, Christianity was best understood, practiced, and brought to flourishing by caste-oppressed communities. While Brahminical Christianity caged and corrupted the faith to fit caste norms, Dalit Christianity was a liberating movement that spread rapidly, empowered “untouchables,” and “proclaimed good news to the poor,” as Jesus insisted in Luke 4.

In the early 1980s, Dalit Christians joined other social movements in the face of caste massacres, to assert themselves in a new way. Through suffering, revolutionary consciousness, and inspiration from black and Latin American liberation theologies, Dalit liberation theology was born.

A GOD WHO SUFFERS

“My caste is *Christian*.” In the Christian church, Indians are generally averse to speaking candidly about caste. Boopalan likens it to controversies of race and politics at the classic American Thanksgiving dinner. When the subject is broached, statements like these are common.

Seeking to escape the clutches of caste, Indian Christianity often advocates for a sort of “casteless” society. Similar to so-called “color blindness” about race, facile “castelessness” aspires to reduce caste identity and cultivate a common identity as “Christians.” But this approach actually ignores, perpetuates, and accentuates Dalits’ painful reality. It does not ultimately deal with India’s great sin of caste and instead allows it to fester within the church.

“In my church, we were kept from participating in different ministries,” said Sri Lankan artist and priest Rev. Jebasingh Samuvel in an interview. “They took and hid our choir dresses to keep us from singing. They took our microphones and made us sing at the back of the choir. I

realized, then, that we came to Christianity from Hinduism for human dignity—but even in Christianity, we are still facing discrimination.”

Dalit theology was developed by people once deemed untouchable who reclaimed their Dalit identity to honor their history of resilience. It identifies Jesus as a Dalit to emphasize God’s incarnation and liberating work in *this* world, not only the next.

In Jesus, Dalits found a God who knew, entered, and redeemed their experience of suffering. Nirmal called Jesus “the Prototype of all Dalits.”

Jesus was a poor refugee who made his home and ministry with the marginalized and was executed by the state. He rose triumphantly from an unjust death, demonstrating power to conquer sin and oppression, and gives living hope to a dying world. Jesus’ birth, life, and death is *precisely* the Dalit experience. And Jesus’ resurrection is the power, hope, and freedom that liberates us. To Dalits, he is present in suffering, and he also liberates from suffering—today and in the next world.



“For a community whose world was characterized by historic crosses, accepting somebody with that historic experience of the cross was not difficult,” Dayam said. “God is broken, crushed, and torn asunder on the cross ... for a ‘re-membering,’ or putting together of the body in Christ. Neither Jew nor Gentile. Neither female nor male. That’s what the gospel vision is: Jesus, the Dalit, re-members the otherwise broken body politic.”

When we finally allow the cross to liberate us, it changes everything. In some places, Dalit Christians were not allowed to participate in Communion until after upper-caste congregants did. In Tamil Nadu, Dalits practiced *Oorulai*—a form of Communion in which every household cooked in pots, brought them to church, and poured each into a single vessel. Folk spirituality like this gives us true models of God and community.

Dalits were also drawn to Jesus because of his word. With the Bible, they finally had direct access to read and listen to scriptures. Brahminical texts, such as Gautama Dharma Sutra, specifically prescribed violence against caste-oppressed people who engaged with Hindu sacred texts. Theologian Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon wrote, “For a community that was denied access to traditional [Hindu]



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scriptures and experienced discrimination sanctified and justified by the same scriptures ... the gospel message came to them as the first ray of hope they had ever known.”

As Dalits study biblical texts, *everyone* benefits. Fields such as Dalit hermeneutics and Dalit womanism arise out of this work, sharing a liberatory self-assertion similar to that in Dalit literary movements of the 1980s. These theological contributions are not a departure from biblical truth—quite the opposite. They are authentic expressions of God’s eternal word working in God’s people.

“When I read the Bible from a Dalit perspective, I see Jesus embracing Dalitness,” said Samuvel. “Reading passages like Luke 4 and John 2 from a Dalit perspective gives me hope personally and gives us healing communally. They teach us to question corrupt systems. And my Dalit spirituality always encourages me to work for others. It is never a self-oriented spirituality, but a community-oriented spirituality.”

RECLAIMING A FUNDAMENTAL HUMANITY

The topic of caste can be overwhelming, especially for non-Dalits and non-South Asians. It may feel confusing or disheartening, and gaining a deeper understanding about it may cause you to relearn *everything* about India—from yoga to vegetarianism.

For South Asians, our response should involve detangling and dismantling the deeply rooted personal, systemic, and spiritual stronghold of caste *wherever* we are. Caste takes our people’s lives by the minute. It persists as a dire human rights crisis under our noses, and yet we often shrink away in defeat, compliance, and ignorance. Christians especially must openly and systematically address caste as sin that we can *all* be liberated from—Dalit and Brahmin alike, oppressed and oppressor alike. In doing so, we must elevate Dalit voices. This is why we *all* need Dalit liberation theology.

“In turning in repentance to broken communities, one [finds] one’s participation in the life of God,” Dayam said.

The Dalit liberation movement is not focused on land, culture, or self-determination. It is distinctly a movement to reclaim fundamental humanity. Dalit theology calls *all* people to rediscover their humanity as created by God. Though embodied in the “crushed people” of India, Dalit theology engages with and shapes God’s global movement of liberation—especially as Hindu nationalism and caste violence rise around the world. Dalit theology offers us God’s prophetic call: repent, resist, and ultimately be *human* again.

“God became human not that humans can become divine, but that humans can simply become human again,” Boopalan said. “For me, Dalit healing means simply that.” ✦

Daniel Sunkari (dansunkari.com) works with Servant Partners, a spiritual movement pursuing transformation in poor urban communities, and writes about faith, caste, and diasporic South Asian identity.



JULIA ALVAREZ LEARNS
TO MEDITATE ON DEATH
AND GETS A GLIMPSE OF
WHAT LIES BEYOND. —————→

Prayer



I was going through a period of grieving when a friend in my St. Stephens' family told me about a centering prayer/meditation group that met Thursday afternoons at the church. I had never heard the term "centering prayer," but I had tried meditation a num-

ber of times. "I'm no good at that," I explained, but her quiet kindness was persuasive. Hey, maybe there was something in it for me, too. I thought I'd give it a try.

As I attended more sessions and read more and more about centering prayer, I realized that my initial reaction revealed what was impeding growth. Being good at something, succeeding at it, was how the hardworking, achievement-oriented me had (mis)understood this spiritual practice. That hardy, eager little self—going also by the name of ego—had served me well to get to where I had gotten, but it was often a handicap in the territory I was beginning (cautiously) to enter with my Thursday afternoon group.

I recall at one point complaining, as little selves are wont to do, that I felt like a too-large Alice crammed into a small box when I meditated. I was right. My robust ego, with whom I was overly identified, would never make it

through the narrow meditation door and into the beautiful garden. No wonder I had been baffled by phrases such as "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Really? Wouldn't Jesus want us to be rich in spirit? Poverty empties us for the hugeness of God. I had to let go.

At one point we went around the circle, sharing what had brought each one here. When my turn came, I blurted out that I had come to learn to die. I thought the group would sigh and single me out as a soul in need of some serious work—they wouldn't have been far off the mark there. Nevertheless, everyone nodded. We're all here to learn how to die.

I know, it sounds unappealing. But that's only if we forget the second part of the story: resurrection, new life. Unfortunately, the way there leads through Golgotha, no shortcuts.

It's not an easy task: the continual putting aside of that eager little self and returning to a prayer phrase (hundreds of little deaths in the half hour). Feelings, thoughts, prizeworthy lines of poetry, amazing insights, mounting to-do lists blow in like weather. We sit quietly until that front blows through, knowing that, inevitably, another front follows. (Did I say hundreds? Make that thousands!) Doing so is a lesson in humility, in letting go, in not succeeding, dying to perfection. "Letting go, letting God," the popular phrase goes.

There's a poem by Czeslaw Milosz, "Love," that summarizes what I've experienced on this journey. Milosz writes that love means learning to look at ourselves the way we look at distant things. He adds that this practice will heal our hearts. Birds and trees will call us "friend."

I like to think of centering prayer as the discipline by which we put ourselves in perspective, breath by breath, moment by moment, so that love in all its forms can enter us, befriend us.

Ultimately, the work is not really done by us. Transformation happens without our knowing or controlling it, even without our understanding it. But, friend, the good news is that healing happens, the door opens a crack, we catch a glimpse of the garden. ✱

**I THOUGHT THE
GROUP WOULD
SIGH AND SINGLE
ME OUT AS A
SOUL IN NEED
OF SOME
SERIOUS WORK.**

*Julia Alvarez, author of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and, most recently, *Already a Butterfly*, is a Dominican American poet, novelist, and essayist.*



From *Dick Johnson Is Dead*.

IMAGINING THE END AND BEYOND

By Abby Olcese

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The hymn “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” is one of my favorites in the Episcopal tradition, usually sung on All Saints Day. It concludes with the line, “For the saints of God are just folk like me / And I mean to be

one, too.” It’s a reminder of the people in our lives—living and otherwise—who are everyday saints, not canonized but important in our formation.

In *Dick Johnson Is Dead*, filmmaker Kirsten Johnson celebrates her father, one such everyday saint. Dick isn’t actually dead, but he has been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. How much of his life remains isn’t certain, but Johnson is determined to show him just how well he’s loved by trying to rid him of some of his fear of death.

Johnson does this in a darkly funny way that’s true to her dad’s mischievous streak: She collaborates with him on a series of staged scenes depicting his death from a variety of accidents. Dick is crushed by an air conditioner, falls down stairs, is hit by a construction worker’s nail-filled board, and more. “Everyone dies,” Johnson reminds us, even the people we love the most.

At the same time, Johnson and her father deal with not just the concept of his death but also the reality of his decline. Between each staging we see Dick retire, sell his home, and move in with Johnson. His sharp attitude and sense of humor fade. Johnson comments

on her dad’s state of mind and how her love for him is challenged by the disruption his growing needs create in her life.

That’s why it’s important that death isn’t the only scenario Johnson depicts for her dad: She also shows him enjoying the afterlife. In Philippians 3:20-21, Paul describes the transformational nature of life in heaven, where Christ “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.” In Johnson’s heaven, Dick’s mind is restored. His feet, malformed since his infancy, are fixed. He can finally enjoy all the chocolate cake he wants without having to worry about his heart.

Dick Johnson Is Dead is partly about Johnson preparing for the loss of her father, but it’s also about imagining a fitting reward for a beloved parent, grandparent, and friend. Johnson is able to give her dad the sendoff many of us would love to have and does so while he’s still alive to appreciate it. It’s a reminder, to all of us with everyday saints in our lives, of the simple power that presence and gratitude carry. ✪

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

LANYARDS AND LEGISLATION

Camp Jened, a former summer program for teens with disabilities, is the focus of the new documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*. Co-directed by an attendee of the camp, with an overview of the relationships and activism that began there, *Crip Camp* is immensely prophetic and empowering.

Netflix



Ecological Survival

Michael Christie’s novel *Greenwood* spans more than 100 years, examining the shape and shifts of forests and the fictional Greenwood family. Using trees as a metaphor for the changes we see and the pain we inflict, *Greenwood* is a profound saga on environmental stewardship.

Hogarth



We Shall Overcome

Religion reporter Jack Jenkins’ new book, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*, offers readers a historical perspective on the faith-based activism that has held the U.S. accountable for its injustices and remains central to its moral progress.

Harper One

A HIDDEN BEAUTY

By
Faith-Marie
Zamblé

**BEAUTY IS NOT CONFINED
TO GALLERY WALLS OR
MUSEUM SHOWROOMS.
IT SPRINGS FORTH,
UNBIDDEN.**



Curated

Confession: I have a bone to pick with the word “curated” this month. I’m finding that the word, while generally useful in art contexts, let me down during Lent this year.

Let me explain.

“Curation” evolved from the word “curare” (to take care of) but, as it exists now, covers anything from making playlists to putting on a painting exhibition. I don’t have an issue with the chameleonic nature of the term, though I know it’s beginning to vex actual museum curators. What is difficult for me to wrap my mind around is the fussiness that curation implies.

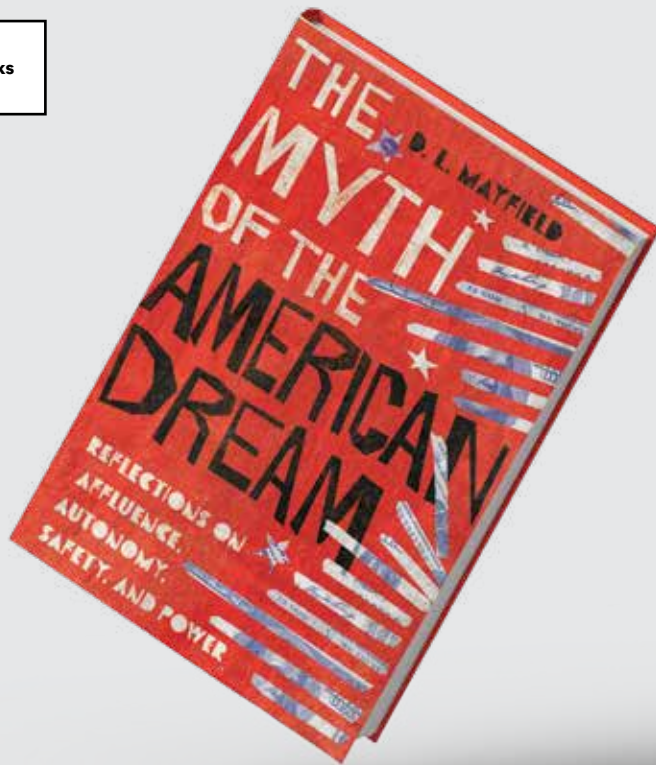
It’s synonymous with caring for objects and, subsequently, caring for an audience by displaying the objects in an interesting and informative way. But, as a representation of spiritual wilderness, Lent seems diametrically opposed to the idea of a carefully considered experience. In Lent, nothing is planned. This year, I simply showed up in the

metaphorical desert and started walking. It was a time when I faced myself in truth, without attempting to curate a self devoid of flaws, rough edges, and woundedness. I was instead being asked to see the world for what it is, myself for who I am, to let go of my penchant for materialism and ingratitude. Fun stuff.

The flipside, though, is the ability to be more present with the people around me and the eternal flock of miracles that fall from the sky when I am wise enough to pay attention. In a recent *New York Times* article, Hans Ulrich Obrist reminds us that the “cur” in “curation” is the “cur” in “curious.” Far from offering a clean vision of beauty, Lent—and other times of spiritual attentiveness—invites us to be interested in the ways God shows up, even in the middle of suffering.

This spring I heard, for the first time, Etta James’ live performance of “I’d Rather Go Blind,” and she sang with a gravitas that belied deep pain while simultaneously wielding her voice with the nimbleness of a trained fencer. After hearing that song, I didn’t know how I had lived my life without it. And it reminded me that even as we wander alone, in dark nights of the soul, beauty is not confined to gallery walls or museum showrooms, or even our playlists. It springs forth, unbidden. May we let it find us. ✕

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and M.F.A. candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.



**"WE DO NOT CARE THAT PEOPLE
WILL SUFFER AND DIE DUE TO
OUR OWN DESIRE FOR SAFETY."**

U.S. education system, and other aspects of local and national politics.

It is important to note that *The Myth of the American Dream* is not meant to be a book of answers. These essays encourage observation, community, and connectedness by causing readers to notice and reflect. It is a narrative that discriminates between sympathy and service to examine a real vision of "neighbor-love." Throughout the book we are led to ask, "Who pays for our myths?"

A Christian committed to a justice-oriented worldview will likely trace their own thoughts in Mayfield's philosophy without finding anything radical. But this is an important work for those with an unexamined white American Christianity. Like Austin Channing Brown's *I'm Still Here* and Soong-Chan Rah's *The Next Evangelicalism*, this book challenges the white middle-class myth embedded in much of American Christianity.

For privileged Christians who only see the marginalized in headlines, these stories model relationship. We may think twice before we send our

children to the city's best private school. We may knock on our neighbors' doors for a long overdue introduction. We may show up for town hall meetings or local elections. We may notice who is not there.

The book could not have been released in a timelier moment. As COVID-19 brings physical distance, this is a book that reminds the privileged to check in with their neighbors. It lifts up a worldview in which hoarding and our country's broken health care system would be anathema. It brings us to a place where we must look beyond ourselves and our loved ones to a broader scope of community. "No matter where we live on this earth," writes Mayfield, "we live with some sort of relationship to empire—and we need to figure out how to live as disciples of Christ right where we are." ✕

Elisa Crawley, a writer and poet, is pursuing a master's in education at Boston College.

TOXIC INDIVIDUALISM

*The Myth of the American Dream:
Reflections on Affluence,
Autonomy, Safety, and Power,
by D.L. Mayfield*

IVP

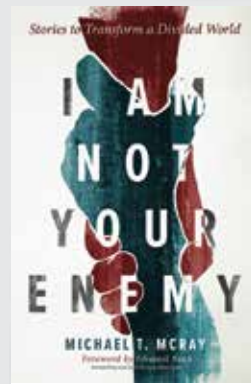
In her latest book, writer D.L. Mayfield welcomes readers on a journey of seeing. This essay collection weaves an exploration of the desires embedded in the American Dream with stories of Mayfield's own social justice conversion and portraits of her Portland neighborhood.

These narratives of how colonialism, capitalism, racism, and consumerism store themselves in privileged American hearts invite self-reflection. Mayfield challenges the American Dream's toxic individualism, dividing the book into four themes: affluence, autonomy, safety, and power. "We do not care that people will suffer and die," she writes, "due to our own desire for safety."

Mayfield reflects on her own awakening and exposure to xenophobic faith communities, where she began to have "serious problems reconciling the Suffering Servant with a conservative religious agenda." The text also walks her readers through the gentrification of her neighborhood and how her community is affected by travel bans, the

A 'POST-CONFLICT' JOURNEY TOWARD HEALING

An excerpt from
I Am Not Your Enemy:
 Stories to Transform a Divided
 World, by Michael T. McRay
 Herald Press



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There's a theory in peacebuilding that it can take as long to heal from a conflict as the conflict itself lasted. Depending on whom you ask, the conflict in Northern Ireland lasted 800 years, 400 years, or 30 years. The Good Friday Agreement officially ended the

violence in 1998. Any way you spin it, this place isn't very far along the healing journey.

The violence here lasted so long that it became almost normal. In my last taxi ride during grad school, the driver picked me up on the Antrim Road. "Do you like living here?" I asked. "I liked it better in the good old days—20 to 30 years ago," he said. "It weren't that violent. It were a pretty stable time, other than the bombs and guns and murders."

I asked him if he'd been affected much by the violence. "No, not too much," he said. "I mean, there was the time I saw my brother walking down the Falls Road, and a black taxi pulled up, rolled down its window, and blew his head off. I remember seeing my mother trying to put his brains back in."

He spoke as if it were not unusual, as if it almost were not noteworthy.

Peacebuilding theory has a word for us in the U.S. too. The abomination of slavery is not ancient history. It ended just over 150 years ago. More than 4,000 black Americans were lynched by white terrorists. Jim Crow laws stole the liberties of millions of black citizens. Today, slavery has a new manifestation in mass incarceration.

For simplicity's sake, if we chart the duration of this "conflict" of racism from the arrival of the first kidnapped Africans to the signing of the Civil Rights Act, that's 345 years. If we were in a "post-conflict" healing journey, then we'd be only 50 years or so into a very long process. To say that race should now be a nonissue in America is to reveal a profound ignorance about the nature of conflict and reconciliation. We aren't out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot.

But rather than let this lead to despair, we'd be wise

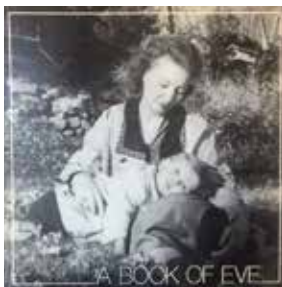
to let it lead to courage, hope, and action. We get to be part of the journey toward healing and transforming our fractured communities. None of us need to be saviors; we just need to contribute. Extraordinary and ordinary contributions—they all belong. ✕

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**BUT RATHER THAN LET
 THIS LEAD TO DESPAIR,
 WE'D BE WISE TO LET IT
 LEAD TO COURAGE,
 HOPE, AND ACTION.**

'AT ALL HOURS'

Poetry by
Catherine de Vinck



Like most poets, she is largely unknown, but 97-year-old Catherine de Vinck can live with that. She has a dozen published volumes to her credit, a collection titled *The Confluence of Time* that she is working to publish, and the love of Christians drawn to the sometimes-shaky Jacob's ladder of contemplation and social action. Thomas Merton was among her readers.

"Nothing stands still long enough / for us to find the first imprint / to grasp the pure moment of origin. / How then can we see the world as it is," she writes in her poem "Ever-Changeless/Even-Changing."

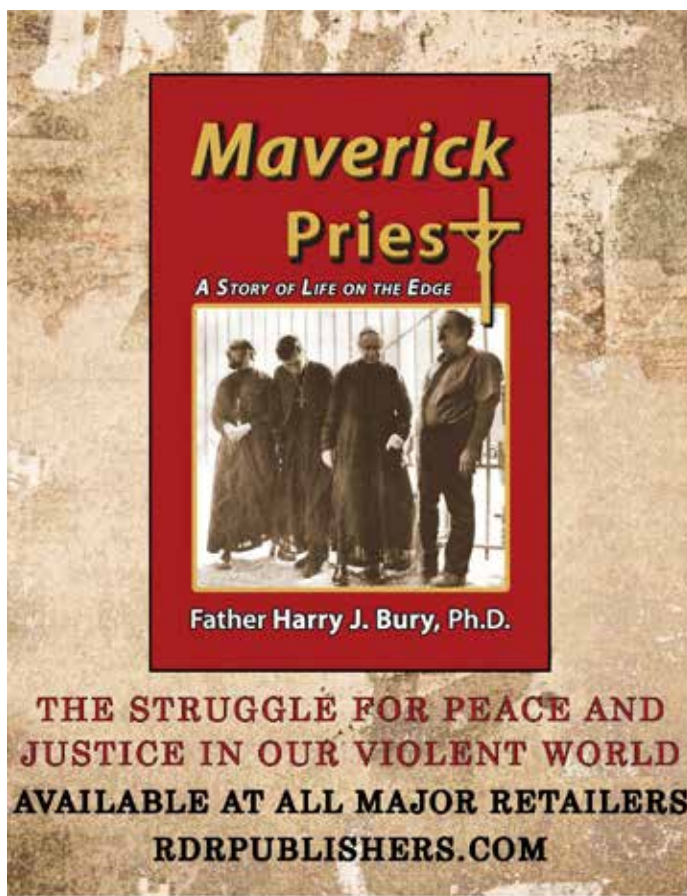
De Vinck lives a life of solitude in New Jersey but grew up in Brussels during the Nazi occupation. Her family once hid a Jewish girl in their home; her father, since he belonged to the underground resistance, was hunted by the Gestapo. "I believe compassion is simply one of the components of being human," she says. In "God of My Life," she writes, "Sometimes I hide your name / like a piece of silver / kept in a deep pocket of silence."

Many of her poems are dialogues with God, prophetic verse flaming with fierce inquiry. She begins "I Hear a Manner of Answers" with the seeker's perennial question: "I ask / and in my daily dust ask again: / Where is the way?"

And in the poem "Jesus Washes Peter's Feet," alert to the fragmented world, to wars and refugees and suffering, she writes: "I die / in all places of terror / at all hours / Rome, Constantinople, Auschwitz / Hiroshima, Babi Yar, Mylai ..."

"God's world," she reminds me, "is not made of different pieces glued together. All things are held together in his love." ❖

Robert Hirschfield is a poet and journalist in New York City.



A New Podcast



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FOR BACH AND BUXTEHUDE, DANCING AT HEAVEN'S ORGAN

By Bradley R. Strahan



*("Oh I'll leap up. Who pulls me down?"—
"Doctor Faustus," by Christopher Marlowe)*

Now can I join this dance?
See, I am thinner than vacuum.
I can kneel toward the sun
at the very angle of prayer
and feel the counterpoint
pulse through my veins.

I could leap so high
this globe would be a speck
in their choral hurricane,
this music an immense verb of sky
where the sun soars
through a fugue of cloud.

Abraham is here and David,
Hildegard with her angel voices,
my neighbor hymning the morning
at her clothesline, even the sparrow
that woke me one December dawn
singing as if it were summer.

Bradley R. Strahan lives in Woodway, Texas. His most recent book of poetry is *A Parting Glass*.

A call for a just immigration policy.



Julian DeShazier

Faith leaders participate in a ministry pilgrimage led by Sojourners to Tijuana and San Diego in January 2020.

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HOLY SPIRIT IN THE STRUGGLE

Scripture passages
are from the Revised
Common Lectionary,
Cycle A.

By Celeste Kennel-Shank



Living the Word

Early on in my training for hospital chaplaincy the spiritual care director asked each student to choose a biblical role model of faith. I chose the Apostle Paul. It wasn't an obvious choice for

someone raised as a feminist and aware of the damage done to women through interpretation of Paul's letters and those attributed to him.

Despite that, I love the way Paul's faith and humanity shine through his words. Even in his letter to the Romans, one of Paul's last and most-polished, we have a sense of his limitations. He mixes confidence and humility, offering an unflinching look at sin: collective sin and the sin that is particular to each of us, broken beloveds of God.

I need Paul's writing on sin so that I don't grow too self-righteous. When Paul writes that we received God's grace "while we were still weak" (Romans 5:6), I am reminded that I can't claim righteousness before God on my own. It is only when we have an honest estimation of ourselves and our capabilities that we can engage in justice work without moralizing or neglecting to set good boundaries.

Taking sin seriously means not only fighting back against oppression but taking a hard look at myself. In my feminism, am I aware of and working to end the ways misogyny particularly oppresses black, brown, Asian, and Indigenous women, as well as queer and trans people? Do I put my own concerns first or truly seek liberation for all people?

Celeste Kennel-Shank is a journalist and Mennonite pastor who lives in Chicago.

THOSE WHO CRY OUT TO GOD ARE NOT PUT TO SHAME.

JUNE 7

WITH US ALWAYS

GENESIS 1:1-2, 4;
PSALM 8; 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13;
MATTHEW 28:16-20

Reading the creation story in Genesis, I imagine myself deep inside a dark place, with the breath of God like a gust of wind. I recall James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Creation," especially as it is read by James Earl Jones in a short film featuring animated clay art by Joan C. Gratz. The darkness through which God births the world is "blacker than a hundred midnights / down in a cypress swamp." From that rich blackness comes the countless colors of the myriad creatures that dwell on the earth.

Too much of Christianity has lost the sense of mystical connection to creation and the Spirit of God animating all that is. That understanding has been replaced by a mindset of colonizing, taking what we can from nature and forgetting about the consequences.

In the present day, one stark example is Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, who has weakened environmental restrictions and accelerated deforestation of the Amazon. As a result, the Amazon, "the lungs of the world," could flip from absorbing carbon to producing it.

It was difficult not to despair when I first read that. The powerful continue to claim the world and its natural resources as their domain. The poor eke out a living trying to extract those resources and sell them, while also bearing the heaviest burdens from mineral-related conflicts and climate change.

It can be difficult to remember that the world does not belong to the rich and powerful; the risen Christ is sovereign. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* notes that in Matthew 28:16-20, Christ not only expands the mission of the disciples to include both Jews and Gentiles, but also claims the entire world. The gospel begins with the coming of Emmanuel—"God with us"—and ends with "remember, I am with

you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus sends the Spirit to stay with us in the struggle against the dominant view of the earth as ripe for colonization and subjugation. Instead, we can embrace our place interwoven in all of creation.

JUNE 14

OUR STURDY HOPE

GENESIS 18:1-15, 21:1-7;
PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19; ROMANS 5:1-8;
MATTHEW 9:35 - 10:8-23

For years I've been part of grassroots efforts to prevent gun violence in Chicago. My spirits were lifted when a nonviolence activist told the story of negotiating a truce among rival groups in his neighborhood, bringing a dramatic reduction in violence. I remembered that hopeful account as my neighborhood on the West Side had shootings almost weekly in a battle for territory this winter.

Like recipients of Paul's letter in Rome, the people I meet sometimes wonder if suffering is a sign of God's abandonment. I find it difficult to see God's presence when successes turn to setbacks. Yet we continue to work in hope.

In one translation, Romans 5:5 says that "hope does not disappoint us." In another, "hope is not ashamed." *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* notes the allusion to Psalm 22—which begins with the cry of being forsaken that Jesus spoke from the cross—and in turn recalls that those who cry out to God are not put to shame.

Some of Paul's theological opponents boasted in their spiritual and material success. Paul turns this charge around and argues that suffering marks a true disciple of the crucified Christ. Believers going through afflictions are victorious yet remain vulnerable in the here and now.

Paul uses the word *dikaiao*, which can mean "vindicate" or "acquit," as well as "justify." He links this vindication with the Holy Spirit who empowers us to keep living in ways that connect us with God's action in the world—even when that action is difficult to see. The Spirit having been poured out means the believers can continually grow into the life of discipleship. That includes holding on to a hope in a God who has not abandoned us, who will not leave us ashamed.

JUNE 21

SINNERS, BE CONVERTED

GENESIS 21:8-21; PSALM 86:1-10, 16-17;
ROMANS 6:1-11; MATTHEW 10:24-39

The Eucharistic prayer most familiar to me includes the lines "in the harmonious world of your creation, the plants and the animals, the seas and stars were whole and well in your praise." Then sin scars the world.

The image of a wound makes sense when thinking of sin. We all know its reality. Yet if there's anything most progressive Christians like talking about less than sin, it's conversion. I've been wrestling with sin and conversion as I read excerpts from the homilies of martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero. Sin and conversion are two of his main themes.

In the late 1970s, violence perpetrated by elites and their hired paramilitaries began in El Salvador, setting in motion forces that continue to force people to seek asylum in the United States today. Romero preached to his congregation in August 1977 about the torture and murder of two of his catechists and a priest, while also declaring the church's solidarity with the families of those imprisoned and disappeared by the armed forces. He compared Jeremiah's prophetic work to that of the church in El Salvador, the work of calling out "whatever would enthrone sin in El Salvador's history, and calling sinners to be converted."

The next Sunday Romero elaborated that this included not only the most powerful in El Salvador, but all people. "If you live out a Christianity that is good but that is not sufficient for our times, that doesn't denounce injustice, that doesn't reject the sins humankind commits, that consents to the sins of certain classes so as to be accepted by those classes," he preached, "then you are not doing your duty, you are sinning, you are betraying your mission. The church was put here to convert hu-

**CAPITALISM REQUIRES
THE POVERTY OF MANY
FOR THE WEALTH OF A FEW.**

mankind, not to tell people that everything they do is all right."

Paul writes in Romans 6 that dying to sin makes us free to live in Christ. To reach that freedom requires transformation—conversion—and healing for the wounds of sin and injustice.

JUNE 28

HOW LONG, LORD?

GENESIS 22:1-14; PSALM 13;
ROMANS 6:12-23; MATTHEW 10:40-42

My husband and I were on a walk near our home in Chicago when we arrived at the spot where 16-year-old Angie Monroy had been killed in the crossfire of gang violence. We stopped to pray at the memorial. At its center is a handmade heart with the words: "the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

I sometimes worry I have become numbed to such loss of life. Then I find I have more tears to shed. At times those tears are in sadness, at others in anger; often they are an inseparable mix of the two. With Psalm 13, I cry "how long?" That was my cry also on the summer day when my husband and I were about 100 feet away from a young man when he pulled a gun and opened fire. Hundreds of people were nearby on the lakeshore. The forces of sin run rampant around us. On the West Side of Chicago, I see the results of white supremacy and ravages of a capitalism that requires the poverty of many for the wealth of a few.

Yet those responsible for killing Angie Monroy and others in Chicago are not permanently ensnared. Neither are the gunmen in mass shootings across the U.S. Though Paul's letter to the Romans names that the "wages of sin is death" (6:23), he leaves room for redemption: All can cease being "instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life" (6:13). Until we all want to change the warped priorities of our policies, we will continue paying the wages of sin and asking, "How long?"

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumps



ODE TO SPRING (FROM A SAFE DISTANCE)

By Ed Spivey Jr.

Despite the gut-deep fear in the world today, I couldn't help but sit in awe of the cherry tree in my front yard. Spring seemed more beautiful this year, and the fallen petals covering our lawn—like snow from the winter we never had—lifted me to a brief, dreamlike reverie.

As it turned out, I was sharing that moment with the cats, who had joined me on the porch. Their unusual attentiveness prompted me to explain why I was at home on a weekday, why they now get their breakfast at 7 a.m. instead of 6 (despite their desperate scratching on the other side of a newly closed door), and why life had otherwise changed in our house.

I told them that a virus was taking hold of our world and that our nation, in crisis but true to its exceptional nature, was led by a president who is exceptionally unqualified for this moment. One of the cats licked his hindquarters in unspoken agreement, and neither contradicted me when I added how shameless were Republican leaders who wanted corporate tax breaks in a rescue package.

When one of them (a cat, not a Republican leader) tried to jump into my lap, I demurred, if demur is the correct word when describing a quick swipe of the hand. I apologized, and started to explain social distancing, but you know how it is when you talk to cats. They maintain eye contact, seeming to treat the matter seriously, but their minds are elsewhere. Perhaps contemplating the sweet sound of a can opener at 6 a.m.

Of course, there is a fundamental problem in communicating with cats and, in fairness to them, there is a reason: They are passionless, selfish animals whom I generally find unpleasant. Which is why we only have two.

STAYING SIX FEET AWAY FROM A GUY IN A GOOFY COSTUME IS JUST COMMON SENSE.

I explained to my porch companions that the virus made inroads into the U.S. population from senior citizens returning from vacations abroad. Elderly retirees who'd been waiting a lifetime to travel overseas are now wishing they had boarded their cats for the week and just booked another trip to Orlando. (Despite CDC warnings, who would turn down a hug from Snow White!? On the other hand, keeping your distance from a guy in a Goofy costume is just common sense.)

I also explained that scientists have yet to develop a cure for the pathogen, but it's only a matter of time before some Christian leaders reveal the cause as God's vengeful wrath against [choose one]:

- gender-neutral bathrooms
- burdensome regulation
- something about the Second Amendment. (It's still not clear whether a good guy with a gun needs a flu shot.)

The only positive has been that Ted Cruz self-quarantined, a status even my cats feel he ended too soon. (If he saw his shadow when he came out, he should have gone back in.) Space limitations won't permit listing others who should remain in isolation, but it would include hundreds of politicians, most AM radio hosts, and virtually every televangelist broadcasting today. Except for one. For comic relief in this troubled time, please, oh *please* let disgraced TV preacher Jim Bakker stay on the air. He interspersed his program with testimonials for his Silver Solutions Gel, which he swears protects against viral strains and which prompted a cease-and-desist order against him. But to my mind he's a walking, talking testimonial to the miracle of renewal. How this unrepentant con artist still has an audience is inspiration to us all.

Right, cats? ... cats?

(I need a dog.)

✱

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

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Women's March in Washington, D.C., January 2019 / Anna Sutterer / Sojourners

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